CHANGING COURSE:
Responding to Youth-Police Conflict towards a Safer Toronto

Ontario Justice Education Network
2017 Project Report
City of Toronto, Community Safety Investment Project, 2014-2016

Neighbourhood Police Officer and Youth Participant | Know Where We Stand: Agent of Landlord Workshop |
St. Stephen's Community House - Youth Arcade | November, 2015
Photo Credit: William Jaksa, Barrister & Solicitor

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Acknowledgements

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Part 1: About the Project

Introduction

Like many cities, in Toronto, some communities face more challenging youth-police relations than others. This is due to a variety of factors which often include miscommunication, misinformation, and a culture of mistrust.

In the summer of 2014, the City of Toronto's Community Safety and Investment unit provided two years of funding for OJEN to deliver justice education programs which would encourage better relationship-building between young people and police in Toronto's Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs): neighbourhoods identified by City Council as vulnerable communities with fewer job prospects, high dropout rates and a disproportionate number of health issues among residents.

OJEN's project proposal focused on the development and delivery of <u>two core **justice education** programs</u>:

1. **Know Where We Stand (AOL Workshops):** workshops delivered to youth and youth workers on Agent of the Landlord (AOL) agreements – a topic which had become a source of great tension between youth and police in many of Toronto's NIAs;

2. **Youth-Police Dialogues (YPDs):** multi-session, interactive justice education programs which aim to build knowledge and understanding, challenge misconceptions, and foster genuine, balanced dialogue between youth and police officers.

Justice Education

OJEN's approach to justice education is not just about giving youth information about the law; it's also about creating a forum for addressing difficult issues.

When justice sector volunteers (like lawyers, judges, and police officers) take part in our programs, they share their knowledge and experience of working in the legal system.

Youth participants, in turn, share their lived experiences and knowledge of their communities.

Both volunteers and youth participants have an opportunity to challenge their assumptions of one another and to build better relationships.

Our justice education programs focus on building legal capability in youth – the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to manage legal conflict, both now and as adults. They are experiential in nature and tailored to accommodate the unique needs of the youth audience.

This report is divided into three main sections: the **first** describes the programs, participants, community partners and volunteers involved in this project; the **second** section contains a summary of the evaluation OJEN staff conducted throughout and at the conclusion of the project; the **third** section highlights the perspectives and recommendations made by the youth who participated in our AOL workshops and Youth-Police Dialogues.

About AOL Workshops

In 2012, OJEN community partners within the GTA approached us with questions about police acting as "agents" of the landlord and how this impacted youth's legal rights. We met with several OJEN partners to discuss agent of the landlord relationships between the police and private property managers and found that many people living in or visiting places where these agreements applied were unaware of the legal implications.

Working with youth, youth workers, lawyers, landlords, the City of Toronto's Community Crisis Response Program, University of Guelph Humber Justice Studies and the police, OJEN developed this **Know Where We Stand: Agent of the Landlord Workshops** to give youth and people who work with youth the opportunity to understand the legal implications of police acting as agents of the landlord.

Organized and facilitated by OJEN staff, these workshops invited representatives from **various stakeholder groups** to come together with young people and youth workers to learn about and discuss AOL agreements, consider best communication practices during interactions with police officers, and share information about the legal help and support available to young people.

We made the Know Where We Stand workshops available in both full and half-day formats. *(A sample agenda from an AOL Workshop is attached to this report as Appendix A.)* Some workshops were held for a youth-only audience or a mixed youth and youth worker audience.

OJEN produced a 20-page workbook which was distributed to all workshop participants. The workbook provided examples of how AOL agreements can operate on various properties throughout Toronto, including City of Toronto parks, Toronto Community Housing and Toronto Transit Commission properties. *A copy of the workbook is attached to this report as Appendix B.*

We delivered a total of **26 AOL workshops** in **16 "high risk" communities**. (11 of these communities are currently identified as NIAs by the City of Toronto.) 10 of the 26 AOL workshops were large regional workshops, drawing youth and youth workers from high risk neighbourhoods across the City of Toronto.

Who participated in AOL Workshops?

- City of Toronto Crisis and Community Response Program (CCRP) staff
- Toronto Police Service (TPS) officers
- Defence counsel and community legal clinic staff
- Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD) staff
- Toronto Community Housing (TCH) representatives
- Youth living in various NIAs
- Youth workers and staff from community-based organizations situated within various NIAs

About Youth-Police Dialogues

Over the course of six to eight weekly sessions, Youth-Police Dialogues (YPD) offer a safe, inclusive space where youth are invited to share their perspectives about neighbourhood dynamics and the issues that cause conflict between youth and police.

Sessions are hosted by community organizations operating in Toronto NIAs (or high risk communities) and facilitated by OJEN staff. Lawyer volunteers are recruited to act as coaches, guiding youth as they build their legal capability, enhance communication and advocacy skills, and learn to frame their ideas and concerns in a way which allows for a respectful exchange of perspectives.

The project culminates in a roundtable discussion. Local police officers are invited and youth share their concerns while law enforcement listens. Police officers are then given an opportunity to respond, before the group discusses ways in which they may cultivate respectful solutions, while addressing community safety as a shared goal.

Sample Youth-Police Dialogue Six Week Project Plan

Session One: Point of View
- o   Exploring community identity, community responsibility, rights and responsibilities
- o   Challenging perceptions about youth justice (rights & responsibilities, police protocol, etc.)

Session Two: Communication Styles – Exploring Power Dynamics
- o   Exploring different communication styles and how we use them in conflicts

Session Three: Let's Talk Advocacy
- o   Effective advocacy, and its use to resolve conflict
- o   How do we begin to rebuild trust as community with respect to the police?

Session Four: Know Where We Stand: AOL Workshop
- o   Knowledge building session exploring the factors that impact rights and responsibilities on properties where AOL agreements are in place

Session Five: Avenues for Change - Exploring Youth-Police Interactions
- o   Youth coached and supported by lawyers to finalize their presentations
- o   During this week YPD facilitators also consult privately with police officers asking them to share their perspectives about the goal of the dialogue and idea re restoring youth-police relations

Session Six: THE X-CHANGE – Youth-Police Dialogue
- o   Facilitated discussion between youth and local police officers.

The 8 week version of this program allows for an additional session on youth-police relations and a pre-dialogue preparation session. It is offered on a responsive basis, especially when the community partner indicates that extra sessions are needed to ensure a successful dialogue between youth and police during the final session. *Detailed facilitation agendas for the Youth-Police Dialogues are attached to this report as Appendix C.*

For all but one of the Youth-Police Dialogues delivered through the Changing Course grant, an AOL workshop was incorporated into the program, based on requests made by the community partners.

We delivered a total of **8 Youth Police Dialogues** in **8 "high risk" communities**. (6 of these communities are currently identified as NIAs by the City of Toronto.) **150 youth**, ranging in age from 13-24 years of age, participated in these Youth-Police Dialogues. 60% of the participants were male and 40% were female.

Project Deliverables

Demand for the AOL workshops and the Youth-Police Dialogues was far greater than anticipated. This, combined with requests from our community partners to expand the intended audience to include youth workers (in addition to youth) meant that participation numbers significantly exceeded original projections:

Original Work Plan	Number of Activities	Number of Participants
AOL Workshops	8 workshops	240 youth participants
Youth-Police Dialogues	6 Youth-Police Dialogues	60 youth participants 24 police officers

Final Project Deliverables	Number of Activities	Number of Participants
AOL Workshops	26 workshops	445 youth participants 413 youth worker participants
Youth-Police Dialogues	8 Youth-Police Dialogues	150 youth participants 25 police officers

Adjustments & Modifications to the Program

- AOL workshops were adapted to include youth workers as another category of participants, taking into account that these allies of youth are often the access points for the most vulnerable youth populations.
- Youth-police relations is a difficult and an emotionally charged subject. In an effort to facilitate an inclusive environment and to ensure that we met the objectives of the session, additional breakout sessions were incorporated into the programs of the largest AOL workshops. Facilitated by diversion and community justice workers, OJEN staff and safety advisors, AOL workshop participants in this breakout session were able to voice their youth-police concerns, share the impact of their encounters with law enforcement and gain a better understanding of legal support/assistance available in their communities.
- To accommodate scheduling concerns, we offered AOL workshops in 1-2 sessions, in 1.5, 2.0 and 3.5 hour long formats (in addition to the full-day program).
- At the request of our community partners, we incorporated AOL workshops into the YPD program model.
- For one of the YPD community partners, instead of an AOL workshop, we explored the intersections of criminal law and child protection for a group of young mothers who requested the YPD program.
- For another YPD community partner, we incorporated discussion about advocacy as it related to gentrification, when a community of youth were recently relocated after their social housing complex was sold to allow for condo development.
- We recruited non-local (divisional) police officers for certain YPD programs, when youth-police relations were so poor that it would have derailed any attempts for true dialogue.

Community Partners/Hosts

Changing Course community partners/hosts were identified and/or selected based on their need for the project. For YPD programs, we also considered the youths' interests and abilities to commit for the duration of the 6-8 week program and the objectives of their ongoing youth-focused programming activities.

Our community partners hosted both AOL workshops and YPD programs and supported our outreach efforts. In particular, the Community Crisis Response Program (CCRP) and University of Guelph Humber's, Justice Studies Department, supported our outreach efforts and made arrangements to access City of Toronto meeting spaces, campus facilities, and provided additional in-kind contributions (catering and student assistance) to deliver the large regional AOL workshops for youth workers.

For YPD programs, we worked with 1-3 lead contacts per agency/organization. We met in person to orient our community partners and outline the objectives and goals of the program. Lead partners played a key role in program scheduling, outreach to youth and in facilitating and supporting YPD facilitators during program delivery.

Volunteers

A total of 158 volunteers were recruited from OJEN's well-established pool of justice sector volunteers.[1] Volunteers provided legal and safety perspectives, while challenging their own perceptions and presumptions of youth living in high risk communities in Toronto.

Changing Course volunteers included:
- Staff lawyers, community justice workers and paralegals from legal aid clinics;
- Private defence counsel and duty counsel;
- Crown counsel;
- Police officers and special constables;
- Community safety advisors, advocates, and educators;
- Police oversight representatives;
- Property owners, managers and landlords;
- Private security;
- Diversion workers.
- Law and community justice students

In AOL workshops, 105 volunteers provided information about:
- The policies and procedures that impact legal rights on properties where AOL is in place;
- Information on the community resources available for legal support; and
- Effective communication practices and strategies during interactions with police officers.

In Youth-Police Dialogues, 23 **lawyer volunteers**:
- Coached youth participants in building better communication and advocacy skills;
- Explored concerns about youth-police relations in their communities;
- Addressed misconceptions about youth justice; and

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[1] A total of 105 volunteers participated in the AOL workshops and 53 volunteers participated in the Youth-Police Dialogues.

- Provided information about legal ramifications and remedies.

In Youth-Police Dialogues, 25 **police officer** volunteers:

- Listened to and connected with youth in honest conversations;
- Described their role as law enforcers, the factors they take into account as police officers (police discretion), and addressed youth justice in the context of public safety;
- Identify shared goals and solutions to build trust and cultivate safety in high risk communities.

A table depicting the types of volunteers involved in both AOL Workshops and Youth-Police Dialogues is attached to this report as Appendix E.

Part 2: Evaluation Report

Evaluation Methodology

OJEN avoids asking our youth participants to take surveys when we evaluate projects. No one likes taking tests, especially outside of school. Since this project involved partnership with community organizations and our Youth-Police Dialogues and AOL workshops for youth took place in after-school programming, we chose to use evaluation tools and processes that we hoped would feel less like evaluation and assessment. Instead, we offered opportunities for youth participants to demonstrate their learning and express opinions about the impact of the program through evaluative approaches imbedded in the program activities. We designed each session with informal inquiries, such as brainstorming and polling-type activities; OJEN staff, interns and student volunteers took notes and collected the information. This process occurred with all 8 of the Youth-Police Dialogues we conducted.

We also scheduled follow-up meetings with each group of YPD youth participants between 6 weeks to 4 months after the program conclusion. At these meetings, we led youth through a series of discussion questions which asked youth to self-assess their learning and determine whether they had used any skills learned through the program. We also asked them to reflect on any impact the Youth-Police Dialogue had on them. This process occurred with only 7 of the 8 Youth-Police Dialogues conducted, as one community partner was unable to schedule a follow-up meeting before their youth programming ended for the year.

We asked all adult participants in Changing Course to complete paper or electronic surveys when soliciting feedback. All 8 of the community partners who hosted Youth-Police Dialogues completed electronic surveys, as did all 25 of the police officers involved with the YPD programs. 12 of the community partners who hosted AOL workshops completed electronic surveys and a total of 268 youth workers who attended AOL workshops completed paper or online surveys.

AOL Workshops

The Agent of the Landlord: Know Where We Stand program was designed to fill a gap in understanding about the enforcement of AOL agreements, and what it means for community members who are subjected to them. The interactive program provided youth participants with the information they need to help them in situations where property trespass by-laws are being enforced by police officers and other "agents". Having a panel of knowledgeable stakeholders – from crown and defence lawyers, to police officers, and Toronto Community Housing Safety representatives – provided the means for a well-balanced discussion about the issue.

Pre-Intervention Knowledge
Before the program began, we polled the participants to find out how many of them already knew what the term "Agent of the Landlord" meant:

- **1%** of the participants reported that they were aware of the term;
- **96%** were unaware of the term;
- **3%** indicated "maybe".

Scenario-based Learning
Throughout the program, we gave the participants several opportunities to act out scenes involving youth encountering police officers who are operating as agents on behalf of landlords.[2]

Youth and youth workers were asked to describe their thoughts about the encounter and what they might do if faced with the situation:

- Most of the participants believed that the youth did not have to show their identification;
- 52% of the participants said that they would <u>not</u> speak up or question the officers about why they were being asked for identification;
- 36% of the participants said that they *might* speak up and question the officers;
- 12% indicated that they would ask the officers why they needed to see identification.

At the conclusion of the AOL workshops, 100% of the workshop participants who completed the survey reported an increased awareness and understanding of AOL agreements. Most participants were able to:

- Identify the purpose of AOL agreements;
- Indicate what their responsibilities are, when interacting with agents of the landlord, and how their rights (with respect to the police) may differ when interacting with police officers acting as agents of the landlord.

Youth-Police Dialogues

We began each Youth-Police Dialogue with a general discussion about community, policing, and points of contention in youth-police relations. We sought youth perspectives on their role and the role of police officers in arriving at effective solutions that promote respectful relationships and keep their communities safe.

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[2] These scenarios were drafted by OJEN staff and based on real encounters shared with us by youth and youth workers who participate in our programs.

When asked what immediately "came to mind" when they thought about police officers, youth participants' responses had positive, negative, and neutral elements. We tracked a project total of 17 positive comments, 77 negative comments, and 10 neutral comments.

"To serve and protect"

"To serve and protect," was a message which resonated with participants and was referred to in every community program, especially when asked about the role of a police officer. However, this point was challenged by the lived experiences of many youth, who voiced that they have had, or know other people who have had, negative encounters with police. Youth believed they did not see this ideal play out in their communities.

"Aggressive" and "Power"

The terms, "aggressive" and "power" drove a significant portion of the negative responses from youth. They relied on information from their experiences and various (social) media

sources to express their frustration with police abusing their powers, acting aggressively towards and instilling fear in people in their communities.[3]

Challenges causing conflict

In identifying the challenges that youth believe cause conflict between them and police officers, many participants highlighted that miscommunication and lack of respect lead to conflict. Youth also insisted that the stereotypical notions police officers hold of youth, including suspicions that they are "planning bad things," contributes unfairly to the tensions that arise.

The Ideal Officer

We asked youth to consider what characteristics make up an ideal police officer. In several programs, youth highlighted "effective communication skills" as an attribute. A few youth participants indicated that the officers participating in the Youth-Police Dialogue program and those that they know in their communities, personified the "ideal officers." These officers listened, were approachable, kind and respectful.

There were many strategies that youth thought were working when it came to keeping their communities safe. They believed that police did catch criminals and make arrests; however they noted that racial profiling was a huge concern for many people living in lower income neighbourhoods.

The youth acknowledged that some police did participate in outreach programs like the OJEN Youth-Police Dialogues, but other participants argued that their participation was "not

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[3] It would be worthwhile (in future iterations of the program) to explore further the roots of these notions, unpack the causes, and reframe legitimate feelings of fear.

enough"; more programming should be made available and more police officers should participate.

The X-Change

During the last session, youth participants had a chance to use the skills and tools they had developed with support from OJEN lawyer volunteers and staff. Through a facilitated discussion with police officers, youth presented their thoughts and concerns to groups of police officers. Some groups presented skits about knowing their rights in carding situations; others explored racial profiling while driving or riding a bike; another group focused on policing as an institution that required a systems-level change.

After watching the presentations, the police officers had a chance to respond. They made efforts to dispel myths that were outlined in the presentations (e.g. proper procedures for street checks, appropriate use of force, what factors they consider when enforcing their powers under the law, etc.) The officers also provided a clear outline of the nature of their work, and identified some of the challenges they struggled with (e.g. "bad officers" who taint the reputation of others). They also echoed the importance of youth learning about their rights and responsibilities when interacting with police officers.

At the conclusion of each Youth-Police Dialogue, there was a sense that solutions to concerns on both sides could be achieved through compromise. Police were encouraged to attend more community events, wear body cameras and act friendlier towards community members – all as positive steps towards fostering respectful relationships and positive interactions with youth.

Post Program Follow Up

Of the 150 youth who participated in the 8 Youth-Police Dialogues, we were able to meet with and hear from 109 youth participants in the follow-up group discussion which took place 6 weeks – 4 months after the conclusion of a Youth-Police Dialogue.

100% of these 109 participants self-reported that they benefitted from the project in some way. In particular, they liked the program activities that helped them deal with conflict (e.g. scenario-based discussions, role-playing and practice exercises). These activities demonstrated the effectiveness of acting mature, remaining calm, and using assertive (not aggressive) communication styles. The youth also liked getting the chance to learn about their rights from the OJEN lawyer volunteers, who many youth characterized as "cool people." They also indicated that they appreciated meeting with the police officers in their community spaces.

Of the 109 youth participants in the follow-up session, 91% felt that the police officers involved in the project benefitted as well. They believed that this type of program gave police an opportunity to understand what safety issues youth were concerned about in their respective communities. They indicated that the YPD program gave police officers the opportunity to get to know them better, and they expressed the hope that officers would

apply this new knowledge and approach their jobs in a more informed way. Some participants admitted being nervous initially about meeting with police officers, but found the officers were "nice." One youth was hopeful that police attitudes could change, and participating in a program like the YPD can help police officers "see the other side."

Changing Attitudes and Behaviours

Reflecting on whether their own attitudes and behaviour towards police changed as a result of this program, 83% of the follow-up participants self-identified an attitudinal shift, while 72% reported that their behaviour towards the police had also changed. Youth described being less defensive, intimidated, and nervous about seeing officers in their community, and felt that they had a greater understanding of and appreciation for the way that police do their work and "what they have to deal with". In one group, a participant declared that they "wanted to be a cop".

For the remaining youth who did not think that their attitudes and behaviour changed after participating in the program, they distinguished the officers who participated in the YPD program from the officers they typically meet on the streets in their communities. They shared their perspective that police are still getting away with "too much abuse of power" and "until the system changes" their feelings wouldn't change because of "the few nice ones."

Understanding the Issues between Youth and Police

Youth were very open about their feelings towards police and their understanding of the issues that are faced by young people and the wider community that create and maintain tension with the police. With the exception of one participant, everyone in the follow up sessions felt that the program offered an opportunity for them to become more engaged in with these issues. Youth expressed concern about the complexities, seriousness, and implications of "carding", Agent of the Landlord agreements, discriminatory practices, and the police complaints procedures. Participants valued the time that lawyer volunteers took to provide a well-rounded picture of these issues and explore the need for change.

Applying Communication and Advocacy Skills

We asked questions to determine whether youth participants remembered and used any of the three communication styles (passive, assertive, aggressive) and advocacy skills highlighted in the program:

- All 109 participants were able to recall the different communication styles;
- 85 of the 109 participants identified that an assertive communication style was "the best style to use to resolve conflict;"
- The majority of the youth (75 of the 109 participants) indicated that they had used an assertive communication style to handle a personal conflict since the program had ended;
- Some participants indicated that they chose to reserve their passive communication approaches for when they were trying to resolve issues with their parents or other people in authority (where it was important that they "comply");

- The majority of the youth who participated in the follow-up session also indicated that they had since used various advocacy and critical thinking skills taught by their lawyer coaches during the YPD program.

Feedback from our Community Partners

All 8 of the YPD community partners completed an online feedback survey. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "poor" and 5 is "excellent," all 8 of the community partners gave the YPD program a score of 4 or 5 out of 5.

100% of the community partners felt that the project challenged youth perceptions about those who work within the justice system, including the police. One project partner explained that meeting with members of the justice system and having a positive experience with lawyers and police officers was a "good way to break barriers and have effective conversations." Another partner explained that good relationships between the youth and members of the justice sector were formed because the youth "heard stories about them that made them 'real people' in their eyes." A few different partners commented that the YPD program gave the youth an opportunity to see both sides of policing in their community.

100% of the community partners believed that the youth participants better understood the role of police officers after the program, and all but one community partner felt that the YPD facilitated stronger relationships between the youth participants and local police officers. (The one community partner who answered in the negative explained that they felt the police officers needed to be more involved throughout the 6-8 weeks to facilitate stronger relationship-building.) Another community partner explained that the program "gave each side an opportunity to speak from their perspectives and gave both officers and youth the opportunity to agree to come up with solutions to enhance youth-police relations."

100% of the community partners felt that the youth participants enhanced their communication skills and developed advocacy skills that could de-escalate a potential conflict with the police.

100% of the community partners would recommend the YPD program to other agencies in the community.

In terms of recommendations and suggestions for going forward, community partners gave helpful feedback that included requests to increase the length of the program and provide even more opportunities for lawyers and police officers to come in and work with the youth.

Feedback from the Police Officers

All 25 of the police officers who participated in Youth-Police Dialogues completed an online feedback survey. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "poor" and 5 is "excellent," all of the police officers gave the YPD program a score of 4 or 5 out of 5.

100% of the police officers answered that they felt the YPD program fostered an open and honest dialogue between youth and the police. One officer commented that the program "gave everyone the chance to express their views/opinions." Another indicated that the "approach was honest and candid" and "allowed for effective conversations." One police officer remarked that "youth were open to discussion because of a friendly and controlled environment," while another explained, "I think that the youth responded in such a way where they felt that their perspectives mattered; the roundtable gave us a chance to hear from them and gave them a chance to hear from us in a good way."

24 out of 25 police officers surveyed indicated that they felt that the YPD program could have a broader impact on law enforcement agencies.[4] Five of the police officers commented that they thought that it could be used effectively as a training tool for police, especially around community and youth engagement. Six officers explained that they thought that the program presented a good opportunity to build good relationships in the neighbourhoods they serve. Three officers commented on how the YPD gave them valuable insight into how youth view the police and law enforcement. Another explained that the program gave him insight into the lived experiences of the youth.

Recommendations and suggestions for future YPD programs from the police officers echoed that of the community partners: officers indicated that more of their colleagues should participate in the YPD program, especially new recruits. Several expressed an interest in spending more time with the youth and participating throughout the entire program (i.e. not just two of the six-eight sessions).

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[4] One officer neglected to respond to this question on the survey.

Part 3: Youth Perspectives Report

OJEN's Commitment to Youth Perspectives

In a society that often marginalizes youth, we felt that Changing Course presented a good opportunity to share youth perspectives on their communities and policing with a wider justice sector audience. Workshop activities and facilitated discussions in both AOL workshops and Youth-Police Dialogues surfaced youth concerns, fears, hopes, and recommendations to improve youth-police relations.

Changing Course generated several narratives in a safe and inclusive structure. Rather than request that youth complete any surveys, post-secondary student volunteers, OJEN staff and interns observed and took notes during the workshops and YPD sessions. Group brainstorming was captured on chart paper and then reviewed and summarized by OJEN staff. Follow-up debrief sessions were conducted with 7 of the 8 YPD groups, where youth were given a chance to reflect on the project and provide additional comments and feedback.

Some communities face more challenging youth-police relations than others. Too often, young people equate interacting with the police with the risk of conflict and/or getting into trouble. Police are in a position of authority and power, which can be intimidating. Cultural differences and lack of understanding between young people and police can lead to escalation. These are among several concerns highlighted by the youth involved in Changing Course, which they feel have led to a culture of mistrust and strained youth-police relations in Toronto neighbourhoods.

We have organized and presented a selection of the perspectives shared by the youth participants involved in OJEN's AOL workshops and Youth-Police Dialogues into the following categories:

1. Neighbourhood Dynamics
2. Perceptions of Police
3. The Ideal Police Officer
4. Challenges Between Youth and Police
5. Understanding Legal Rights
6. Exploring Power Dynamics through Communication and Advocacy
7. Policing the Police
8. Recommendations to Improve Youth-Police Relations

Neighbourhood Dynamics

"A community is like a typewriter; when one key is off, it can change everything…"
- *13 year old youth participant - Capri*

What does community mean to you?
Exploring perceptions of their communities and neighbourhoods dynamics, there was a shared view among the youth that residents' perceptions of their neighbourhoods differed greatly from the perceptions of non-residents.

"All you hear in the news about this place is a shooting that took place, or a drug deal that went down. The media doesn't report the good things that happen here."
- *17 year old participant - Mt. Olive - Jamestown*

"Our neighbourhood gets a bad rep in the media; they only report the bad things going on and it's not even the people here that are the criminals...they [criminals] are coming from the outside...the media doesn't report that."
- *19 year old participant - Malvern/Empringham*

While youth attributed these negative perceptions to unfair media coverage, they also believed that these negative perceptions could be changed by having non-residents visit their communities and learn from the local residents.

"The only way to change people's view of this neighbourhood is to bring them in here….they will see things from our point of view."
- *16 year old participant - Regent Park*

Youth shared that *community context* plays a substantial role in shaping negative attitudes towards the police, as youth are informed by the messaging and interactions they see in their neighbourhoods.

"….young people that live in priority neighbourhoods - see police everywhere. They are out here to catch criminals but they target everyone, not just those who are actually doing the crime."
- *18 year old youth participant - Malvern*

Perceptions of Police and Policing

Youth participants informed us that their perceptions of police, policing methods, and police-youth interactions were shaped by their own experiences, vicariously through their peers, adults, and the media. When they thought of the police, some youth engaged in spirited discussions citing racism, intimidation, and violence; while others shared the view that not all police officers are bad and thought of police as guardians, law enforcers and human beings. All the youth we met with believed that it was challenge for them to trust the system of policing in light of frequent clashes between police and racialized communities.

"It's *unfair that the police keep targeting, and carding young black men."*

- *21 year old participant - Weston*

" If you are a black or brown person and especially if you are male, you are targeted [by the police]."

- *17 year old participant - Cataraqui*

There were sentiments that cited *over-policing* in public spaces and *under-policing* in situations involving victimization in their communities.

"...unless you are living in a rich neighbourhood police don't come here unless they are chasing criminals or harassing people because of their skin colour."

- *15 year old participant - Cataraqui*

" We saw during the G20, police were out in full force – it seemed like they were arresting everyone. When it comes to getting them to come here when there is someone that has been hurt, it is like they are taking their time… doesn't make sense."

- *18 year old participant - Empringham*

These perceptions have led to dissatisfaction with police as well as a lack of confidence in policing methods.

" [Police] officers should be held at a certain standard, and they shouldn't be making mistakes and discriminating people."

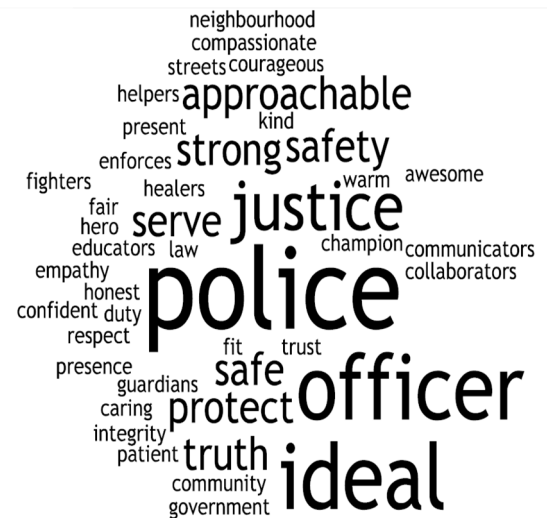- *21 year old participant - Glenfield Jane-Heights*

The Ideal Police Officer

💬"*Police officers are supposed to protect people in the community, but I don't feel protected by them.*"
- *16 year old participant - Cataraqui*

There was a shared view that youth want to feel like they can approach and trust the police in their neighbourhoods. They all believed that the role of the police is to "serve and protect." When it comes to the qualities and characteristics they would like to see in the ideal police officer, youth indicated that they should be unbiased, honest, fair, respectful, free from judgement, approachable and caring. They also stated that police should be educators, sensitive to young people, friendly, and trusting. They also indicated that police officers should take ownership (through relationship building) of the neighbourhoods in which they serve.

💬"*If part of the role of police is to be part of the community then they need to show up at programs like this or at community events. When we invite police [to events] they don't show up.*"
- *22 year old participant - Glenfield Jane-Heights, Toronto Community Housing*

Police interactions with youth were viewed by participants as a growing source of distrust, conflict, and concerns.

💬"*Lived experiences change perceptions. We can't understand them, and they can't understand us.*"
- *19 year old Participant, Weston, St.Stephen's Urban Arts*

There were many youth who told us that they felt that police, within the current system of policing, did not reflect their views of an ideal police officer.

💬"*TAVIS officers are not interested in having a relationship. Me and my friends were in the park, and the way they talk, it's like we did something wrong. They weren't friendly at all.*"
- *17 year old participant, Mt. Olive - St. Jamestown.*

💬"*They [police] come across as being aggressive. They are intimidating.*"
- *19 year old participant, Regent Park*

Challenges between Youth and Police

Almost all of the youth believed that there was a serious disconnect between youth and police, and the youth we met were quick to highlight the challenges they thought had led to a culture of mistrust:

Stereotypes • Intimidation • Harassment • Lack of communication • Feeling like enemies • Carding • Racial profiling • Racism • Abuse of power • Corruption • Fear • Lack of understanding • Rude • Unequal justice • Liars • Bullies • Violent • Fake • Legal gangs • Feeling unsafe • Lack of respect and understanding (on both sides)

Many youth believed that because police officers are in positions of power and authority, they abuse their power and are often corrupt. They also believed that these perceptions stemmed from historical tensions between racialized communities and law enforcement.

" Youth get a lot of their perceptions of police from older heads; people who are older that have had negative experiences with the police."

- *21 year old youth participant - Weston*

The youth also shared that they felt the police hold stereotypes and biased perceptions of racialized youth living in high risk neighbourhoods, similar to the perceptions that non-residents have.

" Youth are easy targets [by police] and are unfairly targeted because they are minorities and live in communities that are already stigmatized because they are poor."

- *22 year old participant - Glenfield Jane-Heights*

" [There are] assumptions that police have that youth living in these communities are criminally involved. What can you do if we are being treated unfairly by the police in our neighbourhoods?"

- *16 year old participant - Alexandra Park*

" There may be criminal activity here but there is criminal activity in Rosedale and other rich places you don't hear about the crime that goes on in those places as much as you do in this neighbourhood in the media."

- *17 year old youth participant - Alexandra Park*

" Communities are safer and stronger when police do not see young people living in certain areas as criminals."

- *16 year old participant - Eastview*

Understanding and Asserting Legal Rights

Youth indicated that they needed clear information on their rights and responsibilities, but also required knowledge about how to communicate and assert their rights when interacting with police. They also expressed the importance of learning how to access legal assistance and support within the justice system, if and when needed. They stressed the importance of making this information available and accessible to all youth and residents – not just those who enter the system due to conflict – because being better informed could help reduce the possibility of conflict with police in the first place.

> "*Working with the lawyers in the program was very helpful. They helped us understand our rights, their role as advocates, and, if approached by a police officer, what we can to do if we need [legal] help.*"
>
> - *16 year old participant - Cataraqui*

However, even when youth are aware of their legal rights, they may communicate them in such a way that could escalate into a conflict with a police officer. Some youth participants informed us that they, or someone they knew, had this experience when interacting with police officers in their neighbourhoods.

Youth articulated the importance of clarifying these misunderstandings so that residents were informed and understood their legal rights, how to communicate them effectively and how to navigate the justice system.

> "*We need to be educated about [youth] rights and [our] responsibilities so that we can deal with a police officer if we are approached. But, we also need to know how to communicate [our legal rights] to police officers.*"
>
> - *16 year old participant - Eastview*

Power Dynamics and Communication Skills

There were several youth we spoke to that explained that they do not feel comfortable interacting with police officers. For some, this discomfort stemmed from:

- The police being in positions of power;
- A lack of understanding about why police were approaching them;
- Fear of "being in trouble", and
- Not knowing how to respond to police officers' questions.

Several youth shared that when they see police officers in their neighbourhood, their first impulse is to stop, turn around, and in some cases, run in the opposite direction.

> *"I was walking home after school and saw a police cruiser just parked. I looked and there were two cops inside the car. I was waiting to cross but the light didn't change so I just ran across the street and into a convenience store...the cops actually followed me in…I panicked when I saw them."*
>
> - *16 year old participant - Weston*

Youth identified and assessed the ways they could communicate and advocate effectively (keeping in mind, personal safety) in situations of conflict with peers and authority figures, like the police. The youth who participated in the Youth-Police Dialogues identified learned about the difference between **aggressive, assertive** and **passive** communication behaviour through participation in the program. These youth were asked to reflect on a time when they communicated **aggressively** in a situation and a time when they were **assertive**. They also considered situations where a **passive** communication approach would have been beneficial, even if it did not result in their needs being met.

> *"It may be difficult when someone [is dealing] with a parent, person who has more power, teacher, police or someone bigger than you but it is better to try to explain your side, especially if you didn't do anything wrong."*
>
> - *15 year old participant - Cataraqui (Oakridge)*

Most youth believed that acting assertively may not always result in getting their needs met; however, it was the best response to use with authority figures, particularly during interactions with the police.

> *"If you didn't do anything wrong and you know you didn't even though you are dealing with a person in authority, it is better to address an [police] officer in a calm and polite manner but explain your side of things."*
>
> - *16 year old participant, Crescent Town*

> *"Being assertive means to advocate for yourself in a calm way. If you don't stand up for yourself, you give permission for people, including the police, to walk all over you."*
>
> - *16 year old participant - Eastview*

We met with several youth during post-intervention follow-up group discussions to gauge their use of the communication and advocacy skills learned during the Youth-Police Dialogues program. When asked, the majority of the youth we met with informed us they had used assertive communication skills when dealing with their own personal conflicts. A small minority of the youth reported that sometimes it was in their best interest to use a passive communication approach. For them, it was taking responsibility to ensure that the situation did not escalate.

"I don't like being confrontational... sometimes it's just better for the sake of peace."

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- *16 year old participant - Capri*

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We also heard from a youth participant that they had to "let the aggression out" during a conflict with a peer, but distinguished this from how they would communicate with police:

"I was mad in the moment. Period. Sometimes it's better for me to let aggression out. I had to express myself…not proud of myself, but it was in the heat of the moment. But, I am not about to do that in a situation with the police…"

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- *22 year old participant - Glenfield Jane Heights*

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Policing the Police

There was a general sentiment that police need to be held accountable for their actions. Police incivility was a common concern felt by many youth we encountered.

"I've seen the way that some police treat some of the young people in our community. It's not right and very disrespectful. It's like they target a few of us to get their kicks – when we are not doing anything wrong."

<div align="right">

- *17 year old youth participant - Malvern*

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When learning about the police oversight system and the different options to file a complaint, some youth participants expressed feelings of skepticism of the complaints process, while others expressed relief. For many, their skepticism was rooted in the fear that if they did file a complaint, the police would retaliate.

"We may have a way to complain, but a lot of youth won't, because they are afraid that the [police officer] may come after them."

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- *19 year old participant - Kingsview (Dixon)*

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When learning about the different avenues for filing a police complaint, the youth believed that they would use this process if needed.

"If I wasn't here, I wouldn't have known about the OIPRD. At least we have this as an option…"

<div align="right">

- *19 year old participant - Empringham*

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To keep the peace, the youth felt that police needed to respect and approach youth in a manner that was non-threatening. They believed that police must have adequate training to work with and engage with young people and residents in the neighbourhoods they serve.

Recommendations to Improve Youth-Police Relations

Although distrust towards the police was deeply felt, we also heard how youth wanted to trust the police:

"Police are there to protect us; how can we not have a strong relationship with them? It makes no sense that we actually feel intimidated when we see them."

- *17 year old participant - West Hill*

"This issue is systemic. All police aren't bad; they are human, but the system of policing makes so many youth fearful of them."

- *22 year old participant - Glenfield Jane-Heights*

Youth also believed that there is strong need for police officers **to reflect the diversity of the neighbourhoods they serve**.

"There aren't many black or brown [police] officers that I have seen roll through my neighbourhood; they are mostly white, and seeing how many minorities are treated by white officers on the news gets my back up with them even more…"

- *20 year old participant - Weston*

Cultural sensitivity and mental health training were also identified by youth as an effective tool to respond to the challenges that they identified.

"After what happened with the teen on the streetcar, it is obvious that they need more training to deal with people who have mental health issues."

- *17 year old participant - West Hill*

"Police need training to understand certain cultures and how to engage with young people."

- *16 year old participant - Eastview*
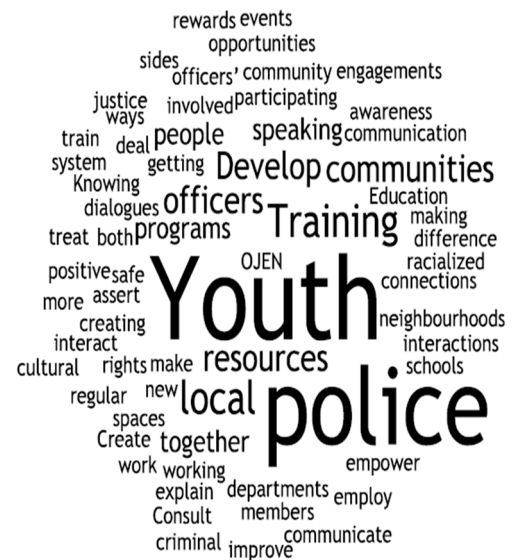
There was also a strong sentiment from the youth participants that young people also need to be responsible for their own behaviour when interacting with police officers.

"There was a shooting that took place not too far from here and the police were everywhere. I was walking with a friend and they saw us. My friend crossed the street and I kept walking straight and the police stopped and asked me questions. I didn't hide or care that he was talking to me. We had seen them talk to a lot of people and I knew what happened in the neighbourhood. I didn't have anything to hide, so I conversed with him. I was polite. He was alright. Then I asked if I could leave, and left."

- *16 Year old participant - Eastview*

"How we treat [police] officers... can determine how they treat us."

- *16 year old participant - Rexdale*

Several youth involved in the Changing Course project felt that not all police policers were "bad or aggressive." They also thought that it was unfair to "paint all police officers with the same brush."

Some of the youth explained that police need to take action to effectively respond to the challenges that have led to strained youth-police relations. They recommended that aggressive officers either be dismissed or be retrained to work more effectively with residents.

Youth indicated that police need to develop both formal and informal connections with neighbourhood residents.

"Sometimes I would like to see an officer just come to my neighbourhood without their uniform and just hang out and talk to young people - and actually build relationships."

- *17 year old participant - Scarborough*

They recommended that neighbourhood police officers be involved in more youth programming and develop better partnerships with community agencies – especially those which run youth programs. They also felt that police officers need to be present and involved in community-related events. Some felt that this should be made an ongoing professional development for the police service. The youth felt that neighbourhood officers needed to be visible in positive ways to foster trust and build better youth-police relationships in high risk neighbourhoods.

The youth involved with Changing Course were made aware of the programs that police have established to encourage better police-youth relations. Some of the youth in our project were involved in these kinds of programs in the past, and expressed that those initiatives did not meet their expectations.

"Last summer, two cops from the local division came with us and we went rock climbing. They really didn't talk to us at all, and they stayed on the other side while we just did our thing. [It} didn't seem like they wanted to connect with us."

- *16 year old participant - Eastview*

"I was part of the YIPI program last year. I didn't really have a great experience – except for the training with all the participants. In the division, I felt like the go-to person for filing and admin. [I] didn't really get to see what their experience was like."

- *16 year old participant - Eastview*

Some youth were unaware that the police had established programs and recommended that youth be made more aware of these programs through effective community engagement. They suggested publicity and promotion of police-youth initiatives in malls, libraries, community recreation centres and afterschool programs. Additionally, some youth believed that young people and police should come together to develop inclusive programming to establish informal youth-police connections in their respective communities. They also suggested that police use radio, television and social media, to promote these programs.

"I didn't know these [police-youth] programs existed until now; police should do more promote these programs."

- *22 year old Glenfield-Jane Heights*

"It's not enough to put up a flyer to promote these programs - enough people walk by them. They could try facebook or twitter, but I think that if they had youth that went through the program promote it, [that] would be even more effective."

- *19 year old participant - Capri*